



W. Fitzhugh Brundage. *The Southern Past: A Clash of Race and Memory.* Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2005. xiii + 418 pp. \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-674-01876-1.



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When Worlds Collide: The Long and Winding Road to the Southern Past

It has been said that the past is a foreign country, and that may be so in most nations. In America, however, the past appears to have a more proximate physical location: the South. The past there, in William Faulkner's oft-quoted observation, seems never to be over, or even actually past. More forcibly than in some other cultures, the past informs—possibly to an unhealthy degree—the South's present, and the present harks back to a past that is anything but fixed, a past that continuously shifts its boundaries in response to the ever-changing demands of the present. As far as the South is concerned, the function of memory in its history's academic and popular incarnations cannot be separated either from the historical or modern racial context, although it sometimes has been, nor should it really be seen as distinct from American national history and its racial parameters, although it still usually is. For much of the twentieth century, Americans revealed the truth of Ernest Renan's famous dictum that in the case of national construction, forgetting is as significant as remembering. In the historiography of memory studies, however, it is the South's selective memory alone that, by and large, attracts academic interest.

W. Fitzhugh Brundage is ideally placed to explain both the construction and the consequences of the South's approach to the conjoined processes of memory and forgetting. Although best known for his work on lynching in the South, memory is a topic he brought to the fore some five years ago in the impressive collection of essays he edited, *Where These Memories Grow*, which introduced many of the themes and approaches that he now brings to fruition in this broad-ranging, indeed sweeping, exploration both of the South's divisive history and the changing understandings of and responses to this over the years.[1] Arranged chronologically, Brundage takes the reader from the immediate post-Civil War period to the present in order to trace the process whereby the white perspective of the past came to dominate in the many memorials erected to the Lost Cause; how it was challenged by Emancipation Day celebrations and in the classroom; how it reasserted itself in the urban renewal projects of the 1960s that resulted in the physical obliteration of much of the African-American past; and how both sides have arrived at either an uneasy truce or possibly, for the more pessimistic, an insurmountable impasse in the presentation of southern

history in the museums, monuments and tourist attractions of the modern South.

The Southern Past appears at a time when historians are discovering—or perhaps more accurately recovering—alternative versions of that past, specifically its Civil War past. This is Brundage’s starting point, although he stresses that the Civil War was not the only historical event on the national commemorative agenda in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. He cites the examples of Andrew Jackson’s home (the Hermitage) and the site of the Alamo as part of a burgeoning national commemoration impulse within which “white southerners sought to valorize their past by erecting countless monuments, staging parades, preserving historic homes, surveying cemeteries, chartering organizations, naming streets, unveiling plaques, and establishing parks” (p. 14). The result was “a landscape thick with monuments and an infrastructure for the dissemination of collective historical memory,” a very specific version of memory, however, mainly constructed by women and rooted in a white supremacist ideology (p. 15). White women’s success in this regard, Brundage stresses, was “both conspicuous and subtle.” By establishing an enduring physical manifestation of their version of the past, these women “created enduring obstacles to the production of alternative renderings of southern history and, by extension, alternative visions of the southern future” (pp. 41, 54).

Yet however eloquent their message, marble and stone are mute. African-American voices in the later nineteenth century were not, and their response to both the visible and invisible markers of a white southern past was both vigorous and persistent. Recent full-length studies of the African-American commemorative tradition support Brundage’s analysis of the process and the challenges this faced.^[2] Brundage provides an excellent synthesis of this new scholarship, highlighting the development of a memory very different from, and increasingly at odds with, the white memorializing process. History for African Americans, Brundage argues, was viewed “paradigmatically, as a parable of racial elevation” since slavery ended. Stressing black progress and achievement, African-American celebrations “mobilized black communities to recall and reflect on the possible meanings of their past” (pp. 95, 99). The greater challenge to the incorporation of the African-American experience in the South’s “official” past came, Brundage shows, not from overt white hostility—which was problematic enough—but from the rather more subtle processes involved in the establishment and development of state archives. These repositories of public knowledge

concerning the past took racial exclusion for granted. “At its most fundamental level,” Brundage stresses, “the project of public history in the early twentieth century South was the archiving of white civilization” (p. 121).

In the face of this growing emphasis not only on white but also male historical achievement in historical works, the challenge facing African-American educators in the Jim Crow South was how to offer their students a past that was both meaningful and inclusive, when almost all the resources described a past from which the black experience was almost entirely absent. Black history societies, such as the Negro Society for Historical Research in New York (1911), emerged in response, but these were exclusive in their approach and, inevitably, in their reach. They were “transitional institutions,” according to Brundage, “that broadened the resources that informed black memory without otherwise significantly redirecting the interpretation of the black historical experience” (p. 147). Groups such as the National Association of Colored Women (NACW) expressed a “more inclusive ambition” for the representation of black history, but Brundage detects little substantive progress until the early twentieth century when Carter Woodson and the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History (ASNLH) offered a genuinely broad-based and less defensive approach to the study of black history (p. 154).

It is in the growing commercialization of the South’s past and the urban renewal projects of the 1960s, however, that Brundage sees many of the old themes of the “Lost Cause” re-emerging, encouraged by the tourist dollar and driven by the need to restructure urban spaces to accommodate the transport revolution of the twentieth century. “Blinded by both hubris and racism,” Brundage asserts, “whites ignored the wholeness of black community life in targeted areas and saw only degraded environments that impeded their ambitions for their cities” (p. 230). The broader issue of civic space, of course, extends beyond the construction of an environment for the local community and into an environment that outsiders may visit. Tourism in the South, Brundage argues, “complemented and extended the white hegemony over public space” (p. 221). In places such as Charleston, if African Americans were going to be visible, it was expected that they would conform to tourist expectations. Yet race is perhaps not the only factor at play here. Historical tourism may indeed have “contributed powerfully to the perpetuation of crippling images of black abilities and sensibilities,” but while the specifics of this power struggle may vary from place to place, the process is a familiar one (p. 225).

From the perspective of the Old World, especially a part of the Old World that many Americans have ancestral ties to, historical tourism can have the effect of objectifying and rendering local populations acceptable in an essentially quaint and unchallenging manner even when race is not an issue. How America as a whole markets itself to tourists is also revealing in this regard. A current advertisement shown across the pond provides several glossy images of the United States with film titles superimposed on them and the final injunction: "You've seen the film, now visit the set." Brundage's point, of course, is that the film many tourists to the South have in mind is *Gone with the Wind* rather than *In the Heat of the Night*, and that elements in the South play up to this. Yet in his recent study of the specifics of memory with regard to one Civil War site, Vicksburg, Christopher Waldrep highlights the role that non-southerners played in the process of constructing the historical South. It was "American nationalism," he shows, "more than white southern sectionalism [that] revived racial memories of the Civil War, putting reconciliation ahead of racial justice." It was the National Parks Service (NPS) that constructed a replica antebellum mansion for its Vicksburg museum, and promulgated a version of the South's past that was unlikely to offend the sensibilities of the most conservative white southerner. In so doing, the NPS was reaching back to a past that predated the Civil War in which "The South"

was constructed as much by outsiders as by southerners themselves.[3] The clash of race and memory may play out most visibly in the contested civic spaces of the South, but the fundamental issues of power and its abuses explored in this magisterial and challenging study are not, and never really were, wholly sectional ones.

Notes

[1]. W. Fitzhugh Brundage, *Lynching in the New South: Georgia and Virginia, 1880-1930* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1993); Brundage, ed., *Under Sentence of Death: Lynching in the New South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997); and *Where These Memories Grow: History, Memory, and Southern Identity* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 2000).

[2]. Kathleen Ann Clark, *Defining Moments: African American Commemoration and Political Culture in the South, 1863-1913* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005); and *Festivals of Freedom: Memory and Meaning in African American Emancipation Celebrations, 1808-1915* (Amherst and Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2003).

[3]. Christopher Waldrep, *Vicksburg's Long Shadow: The Civil War Legacy of Race and Remembrance* (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2005), p. xv.

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